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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 000233

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [BK](#)
SUBJECT: BOSNIA - SPECULATION ABOUNDS ON FUTURE OF BOSNIAK
POLITICS

REF: A. A. 08 SARAJEVO 1593
[1](#)B. B. SARAJEVO 103
[1](#)C. C. 08 SARAJEVO 1911
[1](#)D. D. SARAJEVO 174
[1](#)E. E. SARAJEVO 228

SARAJEVO 00000233 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Charles English. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: We are anticipating a tumultuous time in Bosniak politics as spring approaches. The main Bosniak party, Sulejman Tihic's Party of Democratic Action (SDA), will hold an election on May 26 for its party presidency, and speculation on the candidates and outcome is already captivating Bosniak party officials, media, and Islamic leaders. Media and our contacts suggest that the election will probably pit the moderate Tihic against the more conservative -- and more controversial -- Bakir Izetbegovic, currently one of the party's VPs. The outcome of that election could have significant implications for both SDA's policy path and the party's membership profile, as a number of pro-Tihic officials have indicated to us that there will be a split in the party if Izetbegovic takes over. Meanwhile, several contacts suggest that dissension in the ranks of the other leading Bosniak party, Haris Silajdzic's Party for BiH (SBiH), is paving the way for an upheaval in that party as well, although similar movements within the party in the past have failed to materialize. Regardless of the outcome of these intra-party developments, they will almost certainly consume Bosniak politics at a time when we will need these politicians to make politically risky compromises necessary for OHR's closure in the near term and the country's European future in the longer term. END SUMMARY

Bosniak Political Scales Tip Toward SDA ...

[1](#)2. (C) Following SDA's strong showing in the October 2008 municipal elections -- effectively sidelining rival SBiH -- Tihic has tried to reestablish SDA as a progressive vanguard in Bosniak politics. Tihic has:

-- Declared to the Republika Srpska National Assembly (RSNA) that he will not call the RS into question (Ref A);

-- Collaborated with RS PM Milorad Dodik and Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)-BiH leader Covic on the Prud Agreement and the negotiations that followed (Ref B);

-- Established regular communication with Covic on matters pertaining to the Federation;

-- Called on Bosniaks to abandon the "politics of victimhood" and work toward a multiethnic state (Ref C); and

-- Helped draft -- and lent full support to -- the proposed constitutional amendment on Brcko District, promising full party support for its passage in Parliament (Ref D).

... But Tihic's Position is On Shaky Ground

13. (C) Nonetheless, Tihic's questionable health, lingering resentment within the party over its poor showing in the October 2006 general elections (despite the party's rally in the 2008 municipal elections), and continued doubts about Tihic's ability to effectively represent Bosniak interests have fueled sentiments within the party that favor a change in leadership. SDA plans to hold a party congress on May 26, at which it will elect its president. Media and SDA contacts tell us that SDA VP Bakir Izetbegovic -- son of the late Alija Izetbegovic, SDA's founder and Bosnia's wartime President -- is likely to challenge Tihic. Although Izetbegovic has long contended publicly and privately that he does not want the position, Bosnian media on February 19 declared that he does intend to run for the party presidency.

Izetbegovic told us that a significant number of SDA officials are urging him to run, as they want a "new face" to lead the party. Izetbegovic also appears to have the support of Reis Ceric, the leader of the Bosnian Islamic Community, who declared publicly on February 24 that SDA should have a leader who "is wise and clever, understands Bosniaks and identifies with them, is good-looking if possible, and has a strong family background." (Comment: Ceric has indicated that he wants a devout Muslim to lead SDA, and Izetbegovic

SARAJEVO 00000233 002.2 OF 003

professes to embrace Islam. Tihic is generally viewed as more secular and therefore has had a strained relationship with Ceric. In a conversation on Srebrenica last summer, the Reis told us he would support Izetbegovic to be the next SDA president, although he did not present this as an intention to help "unseat" Tihic. End Comment.) The pro-Bosniak daily Dnevni Avaz -- Bosnia's widest-circulation daily -- also hailed Izetbegovic's prospective candidacy, praising his "personal motivation" and noting that the "intention of Alija's son to take over the leadership position in SDA, through a democratic procedure, should awaken all those so-called Bosnian guardians who detect the problem of 'feudalization.'"

SBiH Dissension in the Ranks

14. (C) Meanwhile, SBiH insider and Federation parliamentarian Munib Jusufovic has told us that there has been dissension in the SBiH ranks since the party's loss in the October 2008 municipal elections, which party rank and file blame on Silajdzic's admitted inattention to the election. (Note: Silajdzic during the campaign reportedly told SBiH officials who were urging him to play a more active role in SBiH's campaign that, as Chairman of the Presidency, he had "more important issues" to address. End Note.) Jusufovic said that the debate over the Brcko amendment at a party presidency meeting provided the first example of SBiH officials standing up to Silajdzic, as all main SBiH officials except Silajdzic urged that the party support the amendment. Although Jusufovic insisted that SBiH would vote as Silajdzic directed them, Izetbegovic told us that his contacts in SBiH have told him that they will support the amendment irrespective of Silajdzic's instructions. (Comment: The first test of SBiH's commitment to the amendment will come at the session on February 26 of the Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee (CLAC) in the House of Representatives (HoR). The CLAC's approval of the amendment would pave the way for the amendment's first reading in the HoR. We will report the results of the CLAC

session septel. End Comment.)

Musings on Increased SDA-SBiH Cooperation

15. (C) Izetbegovic insisted to us that if he were elected party president, he would not take SDA in a new policy direction, as he firmly supports Tihic's present policies. Izetbegovic speculated, though, that if he were SDA president, he would seek a coalition with SBiH because he believes SBiH's ideology -- a "Bosniak voting base but a Bosnian policy" -- is almost identical to that of SDA. Izetbegovic told us that dissatisfaction within SBiH with Silajdzic's leadership raised the prospect that Izetbegovic could bring Silajdzic under his control. He emphasized that Silajdzic "could be the Presidency member and the formal leader of the Bosniaks, but he would have to play by the rules." Izetbegovic insisted that SDA would not seek a coalition with SDP, as they are "unreformed communists who seek to imprison all their political adversaries and do not believe in God." Jusufovic told us that SBiH officials at the Federation level are musing about the prospect of merging SDA and SBiH into a new party called "SDA for BiH," which would follow Tihic's platform and attempt to sideline Silajdzic. He noted, though, that the officials discussing this initiative were reluctant to work with Izetbegovic and probably would not proceed if he were elected SDA president. (Comment: Although we do not doubt that the drive for change within SBiH is real, similar sentiments in the past have failed to produce a concrete challenge to Silajdzic's authority. End Comment.)

Comment

16. (C) It is too early to forecast the direction the SDA elections or the discord within SBiH will take. Regardless of the outcome, though, Bosniak politics -- aided by media and the Islamic Community -- are likely to focus inward after the March PIC as SDA heads toward its May party congress. Bosniak politicians, particularly Tihic, may be reluctant to take politically risky compromises necessary for essential reforms before the dust settles. This may complicate matters over the coming months as we prepare for OHR closure,

SARAJEVO 00000233 003.2 OF 003

consider engaging in constitutional reform, and manage any fallout in the RS over the SIPA investigation of Dodik (Ref E). Over the longer term, the prospect of an Izetbegovic-led SDA combining forces with Silajdzic could portend a more conservative and less compromising direction for Bosniak politics and therefore bode ill for key reforms. We will therefore keep a close eye on these political developments as the spring approaches.

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